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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to sum up the main lessons learned in the process of educational change over the last few decades. It consists of a series of reflections based on the information and experience acquired through international cooperation. These reflections have been inspired basically by the experience of the countries of Latin America and Europe, and the United States. The case of the Asian countries needs to be considered on its own owing to the significant influence of cultural factors in general and of the role of the family in particular. In the case of the African countries, where cultural factors are equally important, the analysis of educational change is closely bound up with the more general problem of the material living conditions of the population that directly affect the chances of success of any learning strategy. The Arab countries are comparable in some respects to those mentioned above, except those countries in which Islamic fundamentalism exerts a strong influence and educational change is associated with the clash between traditionalism and modernism. This paper is essentially a position paper and discusses perverse effects of continual educational change, and national consensus and the long term as conditions of success. The paper asserts that financial resources are a necessary but not sufficient condition of educational change. Educational reform has gone beyond the extension of education to an approach based on change and qualitative improvement. The educational demand as a factor in change is discussed. Strategies for educational change, institutional change, and the denationalization issue are included. (DK)

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CURRENT TRENDS IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM

BY

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Current trends in educational reform

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1. Preliminary note

The purpose of this paper is to sum up the main lessons learned in the process of educational change over the last few decades. It consists of a series of reflections based on the information and experience acquired through international co-operation. In this connection it must be made clear that these reflections have been inspired basically by the experience of the countries of Latin America and Europe, and the United States. The case of the Asian countries needs to be considered on its own owing to the significant influence of cultural factors in general and of the role of the family in particular. In the case of the African countries, where cultural factors are equally important, the analysis of educational change is closely bound up with the more general problem of the material living conditions of the population, which directly affect the chances of success of any learning strategy. The Arab countries are comparable in some respects to those mentioned above, except those countries in which Islamic fundamentalism exerts a strong influence and educational change is associated with the clash between traditionalism and modernism.

This paper is therefore essentially a position paper. The opinions expressed in it are the responsibility of the author and do not commit UNESCO or the IBE in any way.

2. Perverse effects of continual educational change

Over the past three decades at least, in response to the new challenges of social development, education systems have been subjected to a succession of diverging reform proposals which, paradoxically, have increased their rigidity and opposition to change.

In some political and social circles, there is thus considerable scepticism about the possibility of changing the functioning of education systems. A brief survey of the history of the last few decades would lend support to the idea that in education everything has been tried but with meagre results.

This scepticism is most marked in regard to changes brought about from within education systems by the persons involved. Teachers and other educational personnel tend to be regarded more and more as part of the problem and not part of the answer. The reasons for this are various and well known: constant changes decided without consultation or evaluation of results; deprofessionalization of personnel - aggravated over the past decade, especially in developing countries, by decreases in salaries due to adjustment policies -; and increasingly corporative attitudes.

As a result, one of the chief barriers standing in the way of any educational reform is scepticism as to the possibility of changing the functioning of educational administrations. Strategies for radical change from without provoke resistance on the part of those directly involved. Strategies based exclusively on the capacity of a system to change itself from within take a very long time to implement and the pressure of corporative demands is usually too strong to withstand. So there is a tendency at present to prioritize the institutional aspect of educational change. The aim is to open institutions to the requirements of society and introduce energizing factors into the inner workings of educational management - in short, create management with a greater capacity to react to demands and to results.

3. National consensus and the long term as conditions of success

One of the lessons learned from the perpetual reforms referred to in the preceding section is that education policies are not short-term policies or policies depending solely on one sector. The success of

educational strategies is conditioned by continuity in their application, among other factors. However, continuity requires a consensus and the commitment of all those involved in the application of the strategy. In this connection, discussion at international level shows that the present situation is favourable to the establishment of new alliances around educational strategies. Sectors whose interests diverged in the past now tend to have in common certain basic educational objectives, which could therefore become the subject of a national consensus. Making society as a whole responsible for educational action means giving it the authority to lay down the guidelines. In this respect, education policies tend to override government policies and take on the character of what might be called State policies. Paradoxically, this implies in practical terms setting more store by certain forms of educational management at the roots of our systems: national education boards with diversified representation subject to national consensus, local education boards, autonomous institutions, etc. - in short, sharing responsibility for educational management.

Recognizing that education policies are long-term policies also means admitting that a considerable capacity for anticipating future demands and problems is required for working out the relevant strategies. From the political standpoint, the capacity for anticipation presupposes an agreement directing the behaviour of the persons involved in terms of national goals. Political agreement, however, is a necessary but not sufficient condition. The capacity for anticipation also presupposes the availability of reliable analyses of the current situation, a wealth of information on world trends, and machinery for evaluating the results of the action taken so that changes can be made before the results are consolidated and modifications become difficult and costly. So one of the aspects on which efforts are being concentrated at present with a view to the changing of systems of educational management is the strengthening of information systems (measuring of results, observatory of international trends, etc.)

4. Financial resources are a necessary but not sufficient condition of educational change

The shortage of financial resources has been one of the reasons most often put forward to explain the poor results of educational action. There is no doubt that in most of the countries the resources set aside for education are inadequate. What is more, they have undergone constant variations due to political instability or inflation. Comparisons at international level show, however, that even when financial resources have been available, the educational results have been equally unsatisfactory. The case of the United States, which is probably the best example, speaks for itself.

'For more than three decades, since the Soviets launched the world's first satellite, Sputnik, successive U.S. governments have striven, sometimes quite vigorously, to improve education. Real expenditures per student rose at an annual rate of 3-3/4 per cent, nearly tripling between 1960 and 1988. Moreover, the added spending bought just what many advocates of increased educational spending sought: smaller class sizes and more experienced and educated teachers. During the past quarter century, the average pupil-teacher ratio in public schools fell from more than twenty-five to less than eighteen, a 30 per cent reduction. More than half of current teachers have a master's degree or higher. And, by 1986, half of the teachers had at least fifteen years of teaching experience.

'These data taken together indicate the true magnitude of the problem. Spending has nearly tripled and performance has dropped. The added resources have clearly made the school system more expensive than in the past but do not seem to have made it better. The United States cannot hope to reverse trends in education just by spending more money. In our view, it must undertake reform that profoundly changes how money is spent. The nation must overhaul education organization.'¹

The subject of the financing of education deserves a separate study. Here it is mentioned merely as yet another element confirming the hypothesis that an overall educational change is needed, and not just the continual adding of resources to the system as it exists.

¹See Chubb, John E. and Hanushek, Eric A. in Setting National Priorities: Policy for the Nineties, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1990.

5. **Educational reform has gone beyond the extension of education to an approach based on change and qualitative improvement**

The idea that more years of study mean relatively greater productivity and social participation has been superseded. Tremendous efforts have been made to extend education systems. Yet the countries in which the quantitative expansion of education has been most successful now find that the results are not commensurate with the efforts made by governments and families: high rates of repeating and low achievement rates show that even to solve the problem of the extension of education, a change must be brought about in the quality of the education available.

The emphasis on quality is now backed by changes in the social demand for education. Technological and organizational changes at the workplace and the strengthening of political democracy call for civic behaviour based on the development of certain abilities which traditional education systems do not normally cultivate: mastery of the codes in which information circulates, ability to process information, to solve problems, to work in a team, to express claims.

The question is how those abilities are inculcated, how they are developed. The experience gained through the curricular and educational reforms so far carried out suggests at least two main lines of inquiry:

The first concerns the possibility of laying down policies in regard to teaching methods. In this connection, international experience shows that there are a wide variety of procedures and that methods are decided on by the teachers even in cases where exhaustive rules and strict regulations exist. The alternative strategy to the laying down of policies or rules governing teaching methods is to enhance the professionalism of teachers by means of pre-service and in-service training.

The second line of inquiry is technically more complex. Up till now, theories of education have supplied relatively satisfactory answers to the problem of how scientific concepts and data are learned. However, new challenges raise the problem of how abilities, values and attitudes are inculcated or developed. Here the answers are not so categorical, either in regard to the theory of education or in regard to its applications in educational institutions.

The emphasis on quality today takes the form of a concern with academic achievement. A key aspect of current trends in educational change is precisely the development of effective devices for its evaluation.

6. The educational demand as a factor in change

One of the most important features of educational reform is to be found in its focusing on changing the supply. The role of the demand has been underestimated or considered only at certain initial stages in the process of change. One of the most novel characteristics of the current trends in educational reform is, on the contrary, the leading role accorded to the social demand. This trend is apparent in two different types of action:

- (i) measures and programmes designed to give the users of the education system (parents or students) more power in decision-making through specific devices such as vouchers, institutional autonomy or denationalization, and
- (ii) programmes designed to improve the quality of the educational demand by providing the users with more information.

7. Strategies for educational change are of a systemic character

Another important feature of the reform strategies applied in the past has been the focus on the changing of a particular component regarded as the key factor in educational change: teachers' salary

increases, curricular reform, administrative changes (decentralization), equipment, infrastructure, etc. Evaluation of such changes has shown that their meagre results are due to the fact that the changes were effected more or less in isolation from the other factors involved. Educational change depends on the interaction of multiple factors acting systemically.

Recognizing the systemic character of educational change does not mean that it is necessary or possible to change everything at the same time, however. On the other hand, it means that at a particular time it is necessary to take into account the effects on all the other factors of changing a specific component. An institutional change - decentralization, for instance - which is introduced without a timetable and guidelines for the training of personnel, curricular reform, the wage structure or methods of providing teaching materials and equipment will undoubtedly have a limited effect on academic achievement.

The chief problem in reform therefore consists in working out the sequence and the extent of the changes to be made for each component. Experience shows that these aspects (sequence and extent) can be dealt with more easily at local level than centrally. It is practically impossible to decide on a similar sequence of educational changes for widely differing social, geographical and cultural contexts. So there is a marked trend at present towards prioritizing institutional changes designed to give institutions more autonomy to work out their own strategies for improvement (school-by-school reform plans, institutional autonomy, etc.).

8. Institutional change is the priority

The key element in discussion concerning institutional change-overs is of course the role of the State. Here too international comparative analysis reveals that there is no easy way out, such as nationalization or denationalization, centralization or decentralization. International experience shows that the successful instances of decentralization are ones in which the central administration is strong, and that the successful instances of denationalization are associated with firm State administrations.

Ultimately the issue depends on clearly defining the role of the central or State administration. In this respect at least three broad areas of responsibility emerge from current discussions:

- The first involves the setting of priorities through machinery for democratic discussion.
- The second involves the development and operation of devices for evaluating the results obtained in the pursuit of those priorities - local institutions and authorities being granted considerable autonomy to decide on ways of achieving these results.
- The third, which is particularly important in countries with extreme social imbalances, involves the application of effective counterbalances for compensating differences, so as to neutralize the possible antidemocratic effects of decentralization strategies.

In short, changing the type of institutional organization through which educational services are provided is a priority from the strategical standpoint. Greater autonomy for educational institutions and closer supervision of results, combined with compensatory devices ensuring fairness, appear to be the main features of the most promising change-overs in this field.

9. Reform or institutional innovation?

The trend towards greater institutional autonomy presupposes changing from the traditional model, i.e. 'reform of the system', to an approach based on institutional or inter-institutional innovations. In education systems with a tradition of centralization, innovation has been confined to the private sector and pilot projects in the public sector. At best, successful experiments have served as a basis for measures generalizing such changes - with results that have not always been very satisfactory. At present it is

increasingly recognized that the success of innovations is bound up with their applicability to local conditions. For this reason it seems more important to generalize the ability to innovate than to generalize the innovations themselves. Successful innovations play an important role in the generalization of the ability to innovate if they are used in demonstration centres for teacher training. In this connection it is also recognized that the ability to innovate is closely bound up with the professionalism of personnel.

10. The denationalization issue

In recent years the question of denationalization as a strategy for educational change has been keenly debated. This controversy obviously has its place in the wider context of the denationalization of State-controlled companies and utilities. In view of the specific character of education and its social effects, however, this issue deserves close consideration. The information available at least allows the following conclusions to be drawn:

- (i) There is no one-to-one relation between the denationalization of education and economic development and modernization. Countries with high percentages of private education attain results as satisfactory as those of countries in which State education is markedly predominant. Conversely, wider availability of private education is not related to satisfactory results from either the economic or the educational standpoint. All in all, the private sector occupies a more important place in education in the developing countries than it does in the industrialized countries.
- (ii) Good academic achievement is generally associated with institutional factors such as an educational plan, leadership, team work and responsibility for results. All these factors and possibilities are normally associated with the running of private educational institutions. However, when the public sector gives its institutions the same chance, the results are equally satisfactory. So the problem is how to introduce the energy of the private sector into the management of public education in such a way that it does not lose its democratic characteristics. This challenge brings us back to the question of institutional autonomy, supervision of achievement and compensation for differences.

11. Are the ability to innovate and institutional autonomy prerogatives of the affluent countries?

Educational reform based on greater autonomy and responsibility at local level presupposes acceptance of the need for a very high degree of personalization of services. In this connection it must be admitted that such strategies tend rather to be regarded as applying only to the industrialized countries or to the middle and upper social strata of the developing countries. Underlying this attitude, among other factors, is the existence in the developing countries of processes of differentiation and of increasing inequality. If personalization is associated with the availability of resources, there is a danger of establishing a two-tier system in which the demands of the poor are met through large-scale programmes and the demands of the middle and upper social strata through personalized responses. It cannot be assumed, however, that because needs must be met on a large scale, personalized attention is less necessary in services designed for populations with small resources than it is in services for populations with considerable resources. In education, for example, a wealth of evidence points to the highly individual ways in which children from low-income families cope with the requirements of the learning process.

The application of varied strategies to obtain homogeneous results is therefore a prerequisite for the attainment of democratic goals. In this connection it seems necessary to make it clear that the tendencies of educational change in the developing countries are closely bound up with the role of international co-operation. National resources as well as being slender are, as we know, normally concentrated on the payment of salaries. The scope for investment in teacher training, educational innovation, equipment, information systems, etc. is very limited. So the role of international co-operation is crucial from the strategic standpoint. Laying down adequate guidelines in this field is therefore a tremendously responsible task.